

BETRAYED
February 10, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 51:1-12
Matthew 26:14-15, 47-56; 27:3-10

It is as if, when God began creating the world, the first word was not
“Let there be light,” but rather, “Let there be forgiveness.”
There will be no world, no order out of chaos, no life from death,
no new liaison between God and us without forgiveness first.
Forgiveness is the first step, the bridge toward us that only God can
build.

The first word into our darkness is “Father, forgive.”

William H. Willimon
Thank God It's Friday

The current motion picture *Atonement*, based on Ian McEwan's superb novel, is about betrayal, guilt, and atonement. You have to see the movie (or read the book) to decide whether there is any atonement, or whether Ian McEwan is suggesting the very opposite: that in this life, whenever there is betrayal, there is just guilt and remorse, no atonement.

The story is set in an English country estate in 1935. An era is ending. Something new and terrible is in the air as Nazi Germany rearms and prepares for war. On a hot summer day, thirteen-year-old Briony observes a brief emotionally charged and suggestive encounter between her older sister, Cecelia, and Robbie, the son of one of the family's servants. She does not understand what she has seen. Shortly thereafter she reads a note Robbie has written to Cecelia, a note he wrote in youthful whimsy to amuse himself, never intending Cecelia to read it. The result of all this is that thirteen-year-old Briony comes to a terribly wrong conclusion about what is going on between her sister and Robbie. And when the occasion presents itself, she makes a false accusation that lands Robbie in jail.

Five years later Robbie has been released from jail to go to Europe with the British Expeditionary Force, now retreating toward Dunkirk. Cecelia is in London, a nurse, waiting for Robbie. Briony, now eighteen, has realized and acknowledged her terrible betrayal and the

harm it has done. She too is a nurse in wartime London, trying to make amends, put things right, seeking atonement. And as the movie comes to a conclusion, it seems to me that the author—one of the finest by the way—is saying, at least, that atonement, forgiveness, restoration to wholeness, and reconciliation are very, very elusive and difficult and, in this life, maybe not possible.

We have our own difficult atonement story and it, too, begins with an act of betrayal, equally complex. The provocateur is Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Each of the four Gospels treats him slightly differently; each provides a few tantalizing hints as to who he was. We know him as the betrayer, the one who, in a despicable act, sold out Jesus to his enemies. But there must have been more to Judas than that. There must have been something about Judas that Jesus found compelling. Jesus called him to follow. Apparently he was the treasurer. He carried the purse. He made arrangements for food and lodging. When a woman one time opened a jar of expensive perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet, Judas objected. The perfume was precious. It could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Good point. Every organization needs someone who thinks like that. They end up being the treasurer, the business manager. Now I am not suggesting that church treasurers are like Judas. I love our treasurer. Always have. Always will. You have to have someone who asks questions, keeps an eye on the bottom line, makes sure the bills are paid and the budget balances.

We know that Judas was a Judean, the district in the south that included Jerusalem. The rest were from the north, Galilee, rural, countryside. And some scholars have proposed that Judas was a member of the Zealots, an underground resistance organization that used guerilla tactics to harass the Romans and that was waiting for the Messiah to come and launch the revolt that would drive the Romans into the sea and reestablish the Davidic monarchy.

We know that a day or so after Jesus came to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Judas went to the temple, met with the authorities, and offered to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. He would do it by identifying Jesus with a kiss. And that, essentially, is what happened. After the Last Supper, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. And there, in the dark of night, Judas led a posse, temple police with swords and clubs and torches. He approached Jesus, who apparently knew exactly what was going on. "Do what you need to do, friend" Jesus said. Judas kissed him. The guards arrested him.

Why did Judas do that? Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their careful, day-by-day study of *The Last Week of Jesus*, say there is

no hint of a motive. It could, of course, have been the money. People do peculiar things for a few dollars. People destroy families, arguably the most precious gift of all, over who gets what when the will is read. Maybe it was money. And maybe Judas was so committed to the Zealots' strategy of violent revolution that when it became clear that Jesus was not going to do that—that when he had the crowd with him on Palm Sunday, welcoming him to the capital city as a conquering hero, and then did nothing but go to the temple and teach—Judas was so disappointed, angry, that the moment he had been waiting for, praying for, came and went, that in anger he betrayed Jesus.

And maybe he thought he was doing the right thing: that Jesus wanted someone to do something to precipitate the final confrontation; that he, Judas, was the only one who really understood and had the courage to do what needed to be done.

That's an intriguing possibility, because apparently Judas was surprised at how the rest of the night turned out after his betrayal. Jesus didn't fight back. And when Judas saw how the late-night trial before Caiaphas, the chief priest, was going, and in the morning a second hearing before Pontius Pilate—that Jesus was being condemned, that he was on his way not to lead a victorious army and assume the throne of David but, of all things, to a shameful death as a criminal—the enormity of his mistake became clear. Judas took the thirty pieces of silver back to the temple, threw them on the floor, and suffered the final blow of the authorities not accepting the money because it was tainted now with betrayal.

Just a year or so ago the National Geographic Society announced that it had acquired and translated an ancient manuscript, 1,700 years old, the long-lost Gospel of Judas. The text describes a secret conversation between Jesus and Judas three days before the Passover—that would be Tuesday of the last week—in which Jesus asks his close friend Judas to sell him out to the authorities and promises Judas that he will “exceed” the others if he does so. Scholars generally conclude that these documents are far removed from the actual events and play fast and loose with historical fact. That's why they aren't in the Bible.

Perhaps you read about it. Reputable scholars identify the Gospel of Judas as the product of the Gnostics, a movement within the early church that taught that Christianity is essentially a system of secret knowledge, spiritual knowledge; that you have to transcend, rise above, the world of the flesh, your body, and all its annoying needs and urges in order to access this spiritual knowledge. So Jesus, the Gnostics argued, had to be rid of his body so that his true spiritual self could shine through. And so, yes, someone had to do what Judas did.

Now, that's more than anyone wants to hear on a Sunday morning. But it is important to understand that Christian theologians, from the very beginning, have said that that way of thinking is wrong, antithetical to the basic Christian gospel that the Word became flesh, that Jesus was fully human, that he died a human death and didn't want to die any more than you and I want to die. There are other Gnostic documents: the Gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalene. And Dan Brown mined them thoroughly in *The Da Vinci Code*.

I think it is important to observe that betrayals can happen for what seem to be very good reasons at the time. Betrayals can happen out of ignorance and misunderstanding, which is what happened when Briony betrayed Cecelia and Robbie in *Atonement*. And I think it is important to put this whole matter—Judas's betrayal; for whatever reason, our betrayals—in the context of forgiveness.

Huston Smith, an authority on world religion, was asked about the single distinctive characteristic of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. For Judaism, Smith said it was family; for Islam, prayer; for Christianity, forgiveness.

The first thing Jesus said, when he was hanging on the cross, was "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Nobody asked to be forgiven. Forgive them the evil they are doing, their betrayals, because they don't understand—how remarkable is that? Jesus was always walking up to people and saying, "Your sins are forgiven" without their having asked for it. Apparently he thought forgiveness was absolutely the most fundamental basis of God's relationship to us and our relationship to God.

Forgiveness precedes repentance. Forgiveness comes first, before anything else is said. Think how different that is from the way things are. We want an apology first. We want confession, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and then, maybe, we can talk about forgiveness. We want restitution, we want appropriate punishment, we want revenge. And here comes Jesus saying, "Forgive them."

There are complications here. "We're not forgiving Christians for killing Jews, ever again," our Jewish brothers and sisters rightfully say. "Don't talk to us about forgiving the Holocaust." Or, "Pastor, I need help forgiving my husband, who is abusing me." And we say rightfully that what needs to be done here is not forgiveness but accountability. "Do it again, buster, and you're going to jail."

Forgiveness, for the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, is a fundamental way of life that simply refuses to respond to evil and

violence with more violence. The world was stunned to see them live that out. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of humankind's most tragic and most familiar flaw: responding to violence with violence, from little children on the playground learning to hit back, to adults retaliating for one insult with another, to nation states.

When we were attacked by terrorists, most of us experienced grief, then anger, then the need for revenge: we needed to strike back. And so instead of concentrating on capturing the people who did it, we invaded a country that had nothing to do with it.

I comb the newspaper every morning to see whether Hamas sent rockets into Israel or whether it was Israel who sent the jets in to retaliate, killing not only Hamas soldiers but innocent men and women. And I pray every single day, "Will someone, please God, find the moral courage to break the cycle of violence and say, 'We will not strike back.' Will someone, please God, have the moral courage to forgive the Israelis for wanting their security and the Palestinians for wanting their land back?"

We have trouble with forgiveness. Everyone knows the least popular part of the worship service is the Prayer of Confession: "I didn't exploit the poor, despoil the environment, and make war. My week was much more mundane than that. Why are you making me say it?" It's a good-natured complaint, but at the heart of our faith is the acknowledgment that we are all in this together and the necessity for repentance and confession is constant.

Professor Gregory Jones, Duke Divinity School, writes, "In one sense repentance prepares us to receive God's grace, but in another, more profound sense, we discover through our repentance that God's grace has already found us" (*Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 16).

And that is the final tragedy of Judas Iscariot.

The saddest verses in the Bible are surely these: "When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented. . . . He brought back the thirty pieces of silver, saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' They said 'What is that to us?' And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself."

Judas didn't stay around long enough to make the amazing discovery that Jesus still loved him, that nothing he did, no betrayal, would cause Jesus to stop loving him. Judas missed the amazing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

None of the disciples does very well in the final twenty-four hours of Jesus' life. In addition to Judas' betrayal, Peter denies even knowing Jesus, and all the rest of them abandon Jesus to save their own skin. All later are restored, made whole, reconciled, atoned.

Only Judas failed to discover that Jesus had already forgiven him, was ready to give him his life back, restored, whole, cleansed, new.

Judas is called "the son of perdition" in the New Testament. It was Martin Luther, who knew a thing or two about sin, who made an amazing discovery. The Greek for "son of perdition" may also be translated "lost son."

That, I think, was Judas, betraying his Lord for what he surely thought were the right reasons. Lost.

He never got to hear the gracious words, "Your sins are forgiven"—but we can.

He never experienced the amazing grace of Jesus Christ that welcomes a lost child home again—but we can.

He never again heard those beautiful words "Come to me, all who are heavily burdened and I will give you rest"—but we can.

He never again got to live a life of forgiveness and, in so doing, to experience the forgiving, accepting grace of God—but we can.

Amen.